

Suga Likely to Maintain "New Normal" in Korea-Japan Relations

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By Terrence Matsuo

On September 17, former chief cabinet secretary Suga Yoshihide officially succeeded Abe Shinzō as prime minister of Japan. Although his arrival as leader presents a chance to stop the downturn in relations with South Korea, experts and analysts say both he and President Moon Jae-in of South Korea will face difficulties in addressing long-standing barriers to cooperation.

Since taking office, Seoul-Tokyo relations under Prime Minister Suga have started off rather cordially. The new Japanese leader held a phone conversation with his South Korean counterpart on September 24, and the Japanese newspaper Nikkei quoted Prime Minister Suga telling reporters after the call: "I told President Moon that we cannot leave our bilateral relationship, which has been extremely damaged by matters such as the [wartime] laborer issue, as it is." According to the newspaper, the Blue House said President Moon told his counterpart that Korea and Japan "should find the best solution for the forced laborers."

The telephone conversation comes after a flurry of hopeful public statements and letters by South Korean officials. President Moon sent a letter to Prime Minister Suga to congratulate him on becoming prime minister, while Prime Minister Suga responded with his own letter calling for "forward-looking" relations. In addition to South Korean Prime Minister Chung Sye-kyun, Yonhap reported that Rep. Lee Nak-yeon, of the ruling Democratic Party, also expressed congratulations to Prime Minister Suga. "I hope for the elevation of Japan's national destiny and an improvement in South Korea-Japan relations," the news service quoted him saying at a party meeting.

Experts say that the introduction of a new Japanese leader is a welcome breath of fresh air for the bilateral relationship. Karl Friedhoff, a fellow for public opinion and Asia policy at the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, pointed to past Korean opinion polls which found Prime Minister Suga's predecessor to be less popular than even North Korean Chairman Kim Jong-un. "I think with Suga coming in, at least there's a sense that this is a reset," Mr. Friedhoff said in a telephone interview. While recommending some caution, he added: "At least now, the door's ajar. It'll be difficult to open it further, but it sounds like South Korea's open to trying to at least think about moving this forward."

Academics warn that past history suggests that positive relations between South Korea and Japan are short-lived events. Dr. Kirk Larsen, an East Asia history professor at Brigham Young University, pointed to meetings between Prime Minister Obuchi Keizō and President Kim Dae-jung in 1998, and Prime Minister Koizumi Jun'ichirō and President Roh Moo-hyun in 2004. "In all cases, what initially seemed to be really significant breakthroughs that hopefully lead to future progress, end up backtracking over issues like Takeshima/Dokdo, or forced labor or comfort women or things like that," he said in a telephone interview.

Domestic politics in both South Korea and Japan remain a significant barrier towards improving the bilateral relationship. Anti-Japanese sentiment among President Moon's progressive base makes it difficult for him to move forward on rapprochement with Japan, said Dr. Hosoya Yūichi, a professor at Keiō University in Japan. During an online webinar hosted by the Stimson Center, he also said that the Moon administration has removed experts on Japan from the policymaking process. "That's why I say that President Moon Jae-in is in the middle of the darkness on how to settle the current difficult situation," he said.

Other experts point to the usefulness of using Japan to shore up lagging approval ratings in Korean politics. "I think in the short term, Moon seeks to improve relations with Japan, but he will fail," said Dr. Sung-yoon Lee, a professor at the Fletcher School at Tufts University. "He will fail because, not necessarily of the new Japanese prime minister's stance, but because Moon, will find it necessary next year to fan the flames of anti-Japanese sentiment." Even if he is not running for reelection, Dr. Lee said in a telephone interview that President Moon entering his lame duck period "bodes ill for any dramatic improvement in the bilateral relationship."

A similar dynamic is also observed in Japan, where the public has hardened against South Korea. Tobias Harris, a senior vice president at Teneo Intelligence and author of a well-received biography of Abe Shinzō, observed that public opinion favored actions like removing South Korea from the trade whitelist. "That hard line to South Korea was actually more popular than [Prime Minister Abe's] government was," he said during an online webinar hosted by the Heritage Foundation. "This means even people that didn't even particularly like him thought that that was the right approach."

Even if both governments were interested in repairing relations, there are other domestic concerns which will take up bandwidth in both the Blue House and the Kantei. Both governments are working to contain the spread of the novel coronavirus, and addressing its economic aftereffects. "The political capital it would take for either side to make a significant gesture is going to be really significant," said Mr. Friedhoff. It is hard to envision a priority on foreign policy when "they're dealing with so many things right now domestically."

Additionally, both President Moon and Prime Minister Suga have a limited timetable before they face the voting public. While the former may not be on the ballot, the later will especially need to find successes in order to win his own mandate for leading the country.

"There might be some space if both sides were to say this is the one thing we really want to try to accomplish," said Dr. Larsen. "But there are a lot of rather pressing issues, not least the coronavirus, economic concerns, and a whole host of other things."

Rather than introducing an era of good feelings, experts say that focusing on shared interests and preventing a further degradation in the relationship may be a more realistic goal for Seoul and Tokyo. "The status quo isn't great, but it's becoming kind of a new normal and we're starting see that both sides are now willing to kind of cooperate," said Mr. Friedhoff. South Korea and Japan should "start to look for things that put both leaders in a place to benefit." He suggested one example would be economic cooperation in southeast Asia, where both sides are actively involved and have fewer sensitivities related to history.

Ultimately, observers say it will take statesmanship from both sides to recognize there are more benefits from working together than against each other. "A world in which Japan and South Korea were close, cooperative friends would be a much better one than the one we have right now," said Dr. Larsen, noting that both are advanced democracies and share many interests in spite of their difficult historical relationship. "A future in which the two are friends and allies and cooperate would be a really good future. It's just hard to know how to get there."

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